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SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTION DATE SET AND LUKASHENKO ALREADY
PROMISING FEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR OPPOSITION CANDIDATES

11. (U) On June 9, Belarusian president Aleksandr Lukashenko issued the order to hold elections for local district and city councils (soviets) on January 14, 2007 with the possibility of postponement to January 28. The last local elections were held in 2003, but opposition activists won few of the 24,000 available seats and condemned the process as undemocratic. Although the opposition is greatly underrepresented in the current local soviets, their small presence still aggravates Lukashenko. During his May 23 speech to Parliament, Lukashenko claimed opposition activists managed to get elected to local soviets not because of strong support, but because of voters' apathy and their low confidence in the effectiveness of the soviets. Lukashenko claimed opposition activists were "preparing for a fierce fight" and wanted revenge for their "crushing defeat" during the presidential elections. Lukashenko ordered his government to find and support qualified candidates for the local soviets to prevent the opposition from winning any seats.

Opposition Ready to Fight Back?

12. (U) During a June 13 conference in Minsk, Ten Plus Coalition leaders and supporters agreed to begin a large-scale campaign for the local elections. Chairman of the Belarusian Party of Communists Sergey Kalyakin acknowledged disagreement among the Coalition parties, but believes local elections would unite them in their common interest to remove Lukashenko. Deputy chair of the Belarusian Popular Front Viktor Ivashkevich suggested recruiting more activists and capitalizing on social tensions that could arise should energy prices increase. Film producer Yury Khashchevatsky added that the Coalition should nominate more young politicians as candidates for the local soviets.

Comment

13. (SBU) Lukashenko has made clear his intention to prevent any pro-democratic activists from being elected to the local soviets. To achieve this end, we can expect the usual administrative tactics and harassment we witnessed during the presidential campaign. Therefore, it is important that the Coalition put aside its internal squabbles and pursue an intense, well organized campaign. It is doubtful that the opposition will win many, if any, seats on the local soviets in the face of regime pressures and falsification, but the opposition's realistic goal is to grow support from a significant percentage of the

electorate so that when the - almost certainly falsified election results are tallied, the population will know that they have been cheated. The participation of local independent activists in the election is also important to, and a barometer of, the development of Belarusian democracy.

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